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ABSTRACT

Activating a community-based and university-based support system for non-anglophonic speakers falls naturally to the writing center. Writing centers employ consultants and help students across the disciplines, and they have historically specialized in collaborative, non-graded teaching. In addition, teachers untrained in English as a Second Language (ESL) teaching have sent their non-anglophonic students or students with serious English speaking and writing problems to writing centers as a last resort. Records show a dramatic increase in usage and a far greater return rate among non-anglophonic speakers than of native speakers when the center has trained, enthusiastic personnel. The writing center at the University of Alaska-Fairbanks has long courted both foreign ESL students and Alaska Native students. In 1995 the Literacy Council of Alaska asked the university to offer services to the foreign graduate students because they and their dependents were overloading the volunteers at the Literacy Council. Thus, the university gained a teaching assistant paid for outside the center and the English Department. A comparison of the number of writing center tutoring sessions conducted prior to the community liaison and the number after shows an astounding increase. To "unlock the locks" the writing center must be viewed as "central" regardless of where the site is in the university system. The initiative must start from inside the university and move to the outside. (NKA)

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CCCC Session Title: Houdini's Trunk, or Escaping the Bonds of Institutional Structures: Creating New Contexts for ESL Support

Opening the Locks: Centering Literacy and ESL in the Writing Center

Activating a community-based and university-based collaborative support system for non-anglophonic speakers falls naturally to the writing center. Writing centers are increasingly administered outside a single department; they employ consultants and help students across the disciplines; and they have historically specialized in collaborative, non-graded teaching. In addition, teachers untrained in ESL have sent their non-anglophonic students or students with serious English speaking and writing problems to writing centers as a last resort. If writing centers engage both the university at large and community services in a collaborative teaching effort, these students become a valuable opportunity rather than a burden.

The writing center can provide a base for tutor training in which community-based experts or teachers from various departments can train tutor/consultants in effective ESL strategies. As tutors become more proficient, they encourage non-native speakers to return. Records show a dramatic increase in usage and a far greater return rate among non-anglophonic speakers than of native speakers when the center has trained, enthusiastic personnel. Such increases provide grounds for additional financial support from the graduate programs and colleges outside of Liberal Arts. Likewise, community groups are encouraged to donate more services, and the system generates more collaboration and increased support.

At the University of Alaska Fairbanks the Writing Center has long courted both foreign ESL students and Alaska Native students. To attract the first group, the writing

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center had attempted opening a satellite site in a building used by the post-doctoral candidates doing their research. We had sent both American tutors and Chinese-American tutors. The response was minimal. After one year of failing to increase our record of 10% of these students, we withdrew the tutors and tried to encourage foreign students to come to the writing center's main site. The writing center does maintain a site in Rural Student Services for Alaska Native students. Native students used that site at about half its potential. In the spring of 1995, the Literacy Council of Alaska approached the university and requested that the graduate school or some entity offer services to the foreign graduate students because university students and their dependents were overloading the volunteers at the Literacy Council. The writing center agreed to work with the council by utilizing a new ESL-trained teaching assistant and a liaison from the Literacy Council to set up foreign students with the special tutor in the writing center. The special tutor trained other peer tutors in the center and the resulting increase in usage astounded us. At the same time, the ESL-trained teaching assistant also tutored in the Rural Student Services satellite and usage increased there at even a higher rate. Thus, including organizations from outside the university as well as within it has broadened our context for teaching and has profited us greatly. In addition to gaining a teaching assistant paid for outside the center and the English Department, the writing center has earned the support of several other organizations that we hope will support the writing center in the face of budget cuts and the vagaries of staffing.

The foreign student population at the University of Alaska Fairbanks varies greatly, but the largest percentage—about 75% of the non-American students—come from Asian and Pacific Rim countries. The second largest group is comprised of Alaska Native students. A comparison of the number of writing center tutoring sessions conducted prior to a community liaison and the number after shows an astounding increase:

Comparison of Tutoring Sessions of Selective Ethnicity

	Pre-Liaison with Literacy Council 1994-95	Post-Liaison with Literacy Council 1995-96
Asian/ Pacific Rim	186	409
Yupik	5	53
Inupiat	4	44
Aleut	9	22

Comparison of Graduate and Undergraduate ESL Tutoring Sessions 1995-96

	Fall 1995	**Spring 1996**
ESL Graduate Students	129 of 198 (65%)	76 of 122 (62%)
Undergraduates	138 of 1,375 (10%)	134 of 1,173 (11%)
Total tutoring sessions of all students	1573	1295

The increase in Asian/Pacific Rim students from 186 to 409 in one academic year results directly from the encouragement from the Literacy Council of Alaska combined with a dynamic well-trained ESL tutor. The tutor's essential role in this process is only too evident in the decline of usage when she left to take a university fellowship (See her paper in this session for a description of her work). The disappointing figures which follow only illustrate how important is the combination of work with the outside body and dedicated, trained tutors within:

University of Alaska Fairbanks
Writing Center

Comparison of ESL Students Being Tutored

	Spring 1996	Summer 1996	Fall 1996	Spring 1997*
Number of ESL Sessions	211	84	136	40*
Number of Total Sessions	1298	310	1329	416*
Percentage of ESL	16.3%	27.1%	10.2%	9.6%*

*Numbers as of March 7, 1997

The drop from 16.3% at the end of Margaret Baker's year of tutoring to 9.6% at the end of the succeeding year marks a return to exactly the level we started with. Our lesson is that we must keep up both the pressure from without and the dedication within.

So Here's how you unlock the locks:

View the Writing Center as "Central" regardless of where your site is in the university system. If you are still housed in a specific department, that does not

necessarily lock you into the way it does things. Remember that sometimes you can open up from the outside easier than from the inside. You want to do both.

Start from the inside.

1. Look at who your tutors are. If they have degrees or are pursuing them in subjects other than English, all to the good. Get them to connect with professors in other departments. Require tutors to come recommended, then use those recommenders as contacts to send students to that tutor. Hire tutors who are majoring in the target languages--for us that is Japanese and Chinese. Give them paid tutor time at the beginning of each semester to make contacts with professors and student groups in their language interest.

2. With graduate students, keep your connections with them as they graduate and get jobs in related fields locally or even at a distance. The UAF Writing Center tutors all over the state via fax and telephone and will start voice & text tutoring over WWW using NetMeeting this semester. Our liaison with the Literacy Council of Alaska is a former tutor, who now works for them as a Vista Volunteer. Her replacement there is also a former tutor as are other members of their staff. We can meet at the local coffee shop and brainstorm ideas or plan training sessions for tutors.

Team up with others inside the university:

When you open the door to another group, you may unlock doors you never knew were there. For example:

1. In 1996 we teamed up with the Library to procure a traveling exhibit of Twentieth Century writers from the British Consulate in Canada. The Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and English faculty read from the works of these authors at a special opening.

2. We have been working with the on-campus Rural Student Services for 5 or 6 years. This group of counselors and tutors help all rural students, but Native students use the place most and some of them speak Yupik or Inupiat as their first language. Tutors with ESL training are particularly effective in RSS.

3. I also use Rural Student Services tutors to train tutors resident at Rural Sites. Because we tutor at rural sites via telephone and Fax machine, the Dean of the College of Rural Alaska pays those bills and contributes to tutor salaries in the main center. Because these rural sites distance deliver classes all over the state, the center applied for and got at $63,000 two year grant from "State-wide," the Office which oversees the three main campuses--Fairbanks, Anchorage and Juneau.

Move to the Outside:

Determine what group off campus could profit from your services and has services or sources of money to support a mutual effort. If the money must come from the university, use the community organization as key to the on-campus lock. Money tends to get stuck where it has always been, applying pressure from without and within simultaneously or in close proximity can make it move.

In our case this action came unsolicited. Since the foreign graduate students and their dependents with ESL needs were flocking to the literacy council, the Director of the Literacy Council approached the Dean of the Graduate School out of desperation. I volunteered the writing center as the locus for a new ESL teaching Assistantship and promised to get other tutors to participate in the Literacy Council ESL training sessions. I then approached the Dean with the relief for his uncomfortable situation. We got free ESL training from professionals, a new teaching assistantship and some of the brightest students on campus coming to the writing center. In addition, we gained an on-going relationship with this non-profit organization that has many creative ideas and connections of its own. In return, the Literacy Council got some relief.

As our current decline in ESL students shows, you have to remain vigilant and keep up the pressure, or the lock may suddenly spring shut. We thought we had an on-going commitment from the Graduate Dean to keep the teaching assistantship, but when Margaret got a university fellowship, he pulled the money. We've had to go through the process of funding the teaching assistantship all over again, but this time we got a commitment in writing. The Graduate Dean will provide the assistantship salary, the English Department Selection Committee will hire the appropriate student. The Literacy Council will provide training and the Writing Center will conduct the tutoring sessions. The teaching assistantship position gives the Writing Center 10 hours per week of experienced tutoring that does not come out of my budget. The training for other teaching assistantships is also free.

Moving a little further out--The Light Touch:

Sometimes you just want to fiddle around and see what comes loose. A few current projects further illustrate how you can cooperate with other organizations outside the University for the benefit of all.

1. The Provost's office on UAF is offering $1000 grants to any department or organization that comes up with a recruiting event. The creative writers and the Writing Center have teamed up in the past to work with high school students in the borough (about as large as the state of Rhode Island), but we've never had any money to do it. We have former Master of Arts in Creative Writing students who are now student teaching in the district and more that will do so next year. We can use that money to communicate with students via computer at their schools before the event, transport students into the writing center for an afternoon, and set up participatory events--readings, interactive writing, whatever. Such an activity will not only promote the university but it will also get students into the writing center before they are ever enrolled at the university.

2. Because we tutor rural sites and got the grant to install computers powerful enough to talk and edit text at the same time at 5 sites, I will be visiting these places this semester and summer. The director at the Aleutians/Pribilof site in Unalaska, a former writing center tutor, has suggested that I do a university-sponsored public workshop on grant writing. Of course, I agreed. That suggestion gave me the idea to offer such workshops at each of the rural sites. Grant writers write grants--Yes? I'm sure you, too, hear the welcome click of gears as the locks spring open to collaborative opportunities all over the state. We can use the collaborative spirit of our writing centers to work together and become centers of all sorts of unexpected creative endeavors.